

“BEING WHITE IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY”: UNDERSTANDING WHITENESS IN AN INTERGROUP DIALOGUE

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Introduction

In hope to foster an inclusive and diverse campus, intergroup dialogue has been a method of social justice and multicultural education on many university and college campuses. According to Gurin and Nagda (2006), intergroup dialogues allow a space for students and peers to explore similarities and differences in group identities while working on intergroup conflict and group identity.



Photo by: Jeffrey Yeung

Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of the current study was to synthesize the scholarship on intergroup dialogue and Whiteness and empirically examine students' experiences in a 7-week intergroup dialogue course entitled *Being White in a Multicultural Society*. Specifically, I used a qualitative approach to investigate how students in the intergroup dialogue learned and understood Whiteness and race(ism) during the course. This research has the potential to explain the processes by which students examine their own and their peers' Whiteness. My research questions were: (a) What were participants' thoughts of race and racism during the course? and (b) What were participants' thoughts of Whiteness, in particular, during the dialogue?

Method

Participants:

Interviewees. Two self-identified White female first year students enrolled in 7-week intergroup dialogue class entitled *Being White in a Multicultural Society*.

Researcher. An Asian American male fourth year undergraduate student majoring in psychology and enrolled in an ethnographic research course on *Whiteness and the University*.

Procedure:

I conducted two semi-structured 60-minute-long interviews during week 4 of the dialogue course. Audio recordings from both interviews were transcribed verbatim. Upon examining both transcripts, I identified common themes.

Results

Dialogue Process Themes

Theme	Illustrative Interview Data
Curious about being White	"Being White, I wonder what that is really about."
No initial expectations for class	"Honestly, I don't think I had any expectations. It was more let's see what happens."
Like dialogue process of hearing different perspective and opinions	"I like how we can all share our points..."
Still trying to understand Whiteness	"I think I'm still learning what Whiteness would me to me."

Whiteness & Racial Themes

Theme	Illustrative Interview Data
Invisibility and normalcy of Whiteness	"I didn't think a whole lot of about it...being White does not define me."
Racism limited at the individual level	"Bias against a person just because...of the color of their skin..."
Color-blind racial ideology	"...I'm trying to get over the whole race issue and I feel like displaying it, separates people and segregates them...that's why it becomes an issue."
Myth of Meritocracy	"I don't that anyone should be labeling themselves...I think it is more about what you accomplished in life...not race."
Fear of being labeled "racist"	"I'm not racist, so I don't really know [about racism issues]."

Discussion

Findings from this study provide new knowledge on intergroup dialogue and Whiteness. Overall, participants had positive responses regarding the intergroup dialogue process on Whiteness. Findings from this study were consistent with critical Whiteness literature. Participants' thoughts of race(ism) included racial color-blind themes and perceived racism as an individual phenomenon. Color-blind racial ideology is the belief that race(ism) is a thing of the past and is no longer relevant in the present moment. This explains participants' unawareness of institutionalized racism as well as believing the myth of meritocracy. Participants' thoughts of Whiteness included themes that described the invisibility and normalcy of Whiteness and themes which inferred fears of being labeled "racist." Due to the dominant nature of Whiteness, often times it is difficult for Whites to recognize Whiteness because they are part of the dominant group. Fears of being labeled "racist" can be explained by Whites denial of individual racism and biases and denial of White privilege (i.e. benefitting from a system that advantages Whites).

In summary, the themes identified by the participants portray a lack of understanding of race(ism) and Whiteness, which consequently paralyzes the goal to achieve an inclusive and safe community at a large predominately White university.

Recommendations

- Increase opportunities for Whites to explore and understand Whiteness and racism, which may include additional intergroup dialogues, workshops, diversity forums, classes, campus events, etc.
- Develop and fund a systematic research program at Illinois on diversity education among White students.